

Nancy Marie Brown.mp3

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SUMMARY

Nancy Marie Brown is the author of several highly praised cultural histories, including *The Real Valkyrie*, *Song of the Vikings*, and *Ivory Vikings*. On the podcast *Fabric of Folklore*, she spoke about her new book *Looking for the Hidden Folk*. Nancy has spent decades studying Icelandic literature and culture, and has visited Iceland 35 times since 1986. She began writing the book as a collection of essays about her experiences in Iceland, and then realized that the stories of the elves were key to understanding the way Icelanders think about and relate to nature. The book emphasizes the importance of stories in making us value and protect the Earth. Two people, Rag and Rock Hilter, were invited to a small Icelandic festival in Connecticut. Rag was asked to give a lecture on Icelandic horses and Rock Hilter gave a lecture on elves in Iceland. The presentation was held in an old Grange building and the technology was outdated and didn't quite work. Despite this, Rock Hilter managed to explain elves using the combination of PowerPoint and the projector. Rag was in the back of the room and thought Rock Hilter would get eaten alive in the question and answer period because she was talking about the little people in Iceland and how touristy it was. In the lecture, Rucka, an older woman with white hair, was not eaten alive in the Q and A session. People were very nice to her. Later at the party, the speaker and the narrator traded books and had a pleasant conversation about the stories. The speaker suggested the narrator to take a walk in nature to understand elves better. She gave the narrator a book titled 'What does it take to find an elf', in both Icelandic and English, which the narrator put on the bookshelf. The narrator, wondering why they were not interested to read the book, finally sat down to read it. The book suggested that the narrator should 'let the child inside come out and play' to be able to find an elf. The conversation is about folktales and the power of being still and present in nature. A book was mentioned that spoke to the person, in which it described to go outside and find a rock to sit on, and to observe the nature around them. It suggested to look at the color of moss, the bug crawling on it, the breeze on their cheek, and the smell of birch leaves coming out. It also suggested to imagine they saw an elf in the corner of their eye. This reminded the person of something their husband wrote 30 years ago about 'Stump Sitting', which is going out in the woods and sitting on a stump until an animal came by. In Iceland, the only native mammal is a fox, so the person should observe the wind in the grasses, wildflowers, and birds. They might even see an elf, and imagine what that might look like.

TIMESTAMPS

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1:00:45 Interview with Nancy Marie Brown, Author of "Looking for the Hidden Folk: Elves in Iceland and Beyond"

START OF TRANSCRIPT

[0:00:03] Vanessa

Battle, battle.

[0:00:21] Nancy

Battle.

[0:00:23] Vanessa

Today we have an incredible, incredible guests speaking about her brand new book, Looking for the Hidden Folk. Nancy Marie Brown is the author of several highly praised cultural histories, including The Real Valkyrie, song of the Vikings, and Ivory Vikings. Nancy Brown has spent decades studying Icelandic literature and culture. She lives on a farm in Vermont where she keeps four Icelandic horses and Icelandic sheepdog.

[0:00:53] Vanessa

Welcome to fabric of folklore.

[0:00:57] Nancy

Thank you very much, Vanessa. It's nice to be here.

[0:01:00] Vanessa

I'm so glad that you're here joining us, and your book is so fascinating. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you started to want to even write this book? Your journey, if you will.

[0:01:17] Nancy

Sure. I actually originally thought that I was writing a travel book. I have been to Iceland about 35 times since 1986, and I keep journals every time I go. So I had this stack of journals of experiences that I'd had in Iceland, and I wanted to turn that into a book. So I was writing essays about seeing a volcano erupting for the first time and taking a horseback ride across the center of the country.

[0:01:50] Nancy

And then on the 21st, I think it was Trip to Iceland, I took a walk with an elf, seer, and her name is Rock Hilda Yon's daughter. And that's how I begin the book, because that winter, as I was trying to put things together, I realized that this collection of essays was not just a collection of essays. As I say, it was sort of hijacked by elves, because I realized that what she was trying to tell me with the stories of the elves factored in to all of the other experiences that I had had in Iceland.

[0:02:30] Nancy

And the underlying theme was that Icelanders think about and relate to nature in ways that were different from what I had been taught to think about nature. And it all came back to the stories that they told. And I realized that in every one of these experiences that I wanted to write about that I felt was so life altering, it was because someone had told me a story, and often these stories were a thousand years old.

[0:03:02] Nancy

So it was very much a coming to realize that what was exciting and wonderful about Iceland was not just the nature and the quality of nature there and the beauty of nature, but the stories that go along with it. So that's what I try to bring out in Looking for the Hidden Folk, the importance of story, in making us value the Earth and making us want to protect the earth and conserve nature.

[0:03:33] Vanessa

So can you tell us about I'm going to butcher her name. What was her name? Raga.

[0:03:40] Nancy

You could call her Raga.

[0:03:42] Vanessa

Raga? Yes. Raga.

[0:03:45] Nancy

Yes.

[0:03:46] Vanessa

Okay.

[0:03:47] Nancy

Raga is fine. She goes by a nickname because nobody can pronounce Icelandic names.

[0:03:52] Vanessa

Right? Yes. I'm not very good with pronunciation of most things, even English words. So, yes. Raga, can you tell us about her and how you met her and a little bit about your experience on your trip with her?

[0:04:08] Nancy

Sure. It actually was quite interesting how I met her, kind of amusing because we were both invited to a small Icelandic festival in Connecticut, and I've been there two or three times and given lectures on my books, and this time they'd asked me to speak about Icelandic horses. I've written a book about Icelandic horses, and I have four of them, and I've had them for about 25 years. So I gave an introduction to the Icelandic horse, and then later in the day, Rock Hilder gave a lecture on the elves in Iceland.

[0:04:47] Nancy

And this was in an old Grange building. So it was this old town hall in an upstairs room that was a little bit dusty and musty and kind of old fashioned. And we were projecting on a screen that they must have had for 50 years, back when slide presentations were popular because it was a little bit wrinkled and a little bit tilted, and the technology didn't quite work. And I'm in the back of the room watching Rock Hilder trying to explain elves using this combination of PowerPoint and very sort of washed out projection technology.

[0:05:36] Nancy

So the pictures weren't all that gorgeous, and they should have been. And I kept thinking, oh, this poor woman. She's just going to get eaten alive in the question and answer period, because it just seemed ridiculous to talk about the little people in Iceland and how cute this is and how touristy. And so I'm sitting in the back. It's kind of cringing. And she actually wasn't eaten alive in the Q and A. People were very nice to her.

[0:06:02] Nancy

She's a little bit older than I am, but she has very long white hair and looks very grandmotherly and very nice. People are always nice to Rucka. So later at the party the next day, I went up to her, and I wanted to talk to her more about the stories because I didn't feel like I'd really gotten the point of the lecture. And she immediately was interested in me and my books about Iceland. And we traded books, and we got along just fabulously. And I said, okay, next time in Iceland, I want to come with you and take a walk, because what she was essentially saying is, you need to be out in nature in order to understand elves.

[0:06:48] Nancy

You can't do it in a dusty old upstairs room with a lousy projector. It's just not the same experience. I said, okay, I'm going to give this a try. And she gave me this book that said, what does it take to find an elf? And it was illustrated, a very tiny little booklet. It was in Icelandic on one side, in English on the other. And I just put it on my bookshelf and said, okay, I'm going to look at this later.

[0:07:19] Nancy

And I started thinking, what's wrong with me? I have an entire wall of books of folklore and of sagas and of medieval literature and what was keeping me from wanting to read her book about how to find an elf. And so finally I sat down with this book and I paged through it, and I got to this section where it said something like, you have to let the child inside come out and play. And I thought, yeah, okay.

[0:07:49] Nancy

Well, that's like reading folktales. You have to bring yourself back to a less analytical frame of mind. And then there came this page that just really spoke to me. She says, Go outside, find a rock and sit down on it and be quiet and look around. Do you see that bit of moss over there? Look at the color. Do you see that little bug that's climbing on the moss? Do you feel the breeze on your cheek? Do you smell the birch leaves are starting to come out? Do you smell the smell of the birches?

[0:08:28] Nancy

And then she said, what was that? Did you see something out of the corner of your eye? Maybe that was an elf. And it was such a beautiful little scene that she created in this book of you sitting out in nature and just paying attention, just being still, being there, just being still and letting it happen. And it was similar to some things that I have read before about taking an awe walk or my husband actually wrote an essay 30 years ago called Stump Sitting, where he would go out in the woods and he would find a stump and he just would sit there until an animal came by.

[0:09:12] Nancy

And what would he see that day? You just have to sit there and be quiet. And in Iceland, there aren't a lot of animals that are going to come by. There's birds, but there's only one native mammal, which is the fox. So what do you see when you sit there as you see the wind in the grasses and the wildflowers and the birds going by and the changing of the color as the clouds go over the mountains? And you might see an elf, but what do you think an elf looks like?

[0:09:47] Nancy

That's different for everybody. Everyone you ask in Iceland sees a different elf. So you think of these as nature spirits. They are spirits of the land, spirits in the rock, spirits in the trees, spirits in the water and in the air and in the mountains. And these are very, very old ideas. These are ideas from pagan religions, from the very early times in our ancestry when we saw the sacredness in everything around us in nature.

[0:10:24] Nancy

And we took care not to antagonize or anger those spirits because they could be very powerful. So there's a lot of that going on in the Icelandic tales about elves, how you don't make them angry by destroying rocks or by building a road through a beautiful lava field. When you don't need that road, you already have another road, or by building a house in a place where it blocks the view of the mountains.

[0:10:57] Nancy

So you think about, do you need something? Is this excessive? Are you taking more than is your due? Are you living in balance? Are you living in harmony with your surroundings? So all these things are worked into these stories that Rock Hilder was telling me when we were walking through the lava field and visiting at other times. And they all sort of infiltrated my sense of what it is like to be in Iceland.

[0:11:27] Vanessa

And so there isn't really an agreement, is what I'm hearing you say, about what an elf looks like. It just seems that there is an agreement that they are to be respected.

[0:11:40] Nancy

Absolutely. There are several people in Iceland who are seers. They are elf seers, and they can see and feel and talk to beings that I can't see or feel or hear. And many other people in Iceland can't see them, but they're not considered to be crazy in Iceland because this is an extremely old tradition. I found in reference to it back in the 15 hundreds, that it is well known that some people can see the elves and other people cannot.

[0:12:18] Nancy

But when you ask someone to describe what they see, even today, what you will mostly get are images of what people looked like in the 17 hundreds and the 18 hundreds, because that's when these stories started to be written down. And so we have the tales of elves written down in collections of folklore from Iceland that describe them doing things that people would have done, especially in the 1850s. That's when the real famous collection was made.

[0:12:54] Nancy

And in many of the tales that you're told today, they're versions of these old tales. So the people are wearing the women are wearing long dresses. The elf, seer, can't imagine them in blue jeans or in shorts. They don't have cell phones. They don't have modern technology. They have technology of the 1850s. And the people who study folklore in Iceland say that's because most people have read these stories, most people have heard these stories told based on the book versions.

[0:13:32] Nancy

But when you look at some of the more like anecdotes than the actual short stories, you can see that some of the parts of elf lore have actually changed over time and have become more modern. So, for instance, on many, many farms in Iceland, there is a patch of grass or a hill or a rock or something like that that is known to be an elf house. And you don't mess with the elf house. You don't bulldoze it down. You don't knock it into the fjord. You don't break up the rock with your sledgehammer, or something awful will happen, like fairy rings.

[0:14:17] Vanessa

And in previous, excuse me, like fairy rings in Ireland, it's very much like.

[0:14:25] Nancy

The Irish tradition because Iceland has a big Irish gene pool, a lot of the original settlers from Ireland. So there's much a mingling of the Norwegian and the Irish concepts in Icelandic elf lore. But this idea of the sacred space, in the oldest stories, if you messed with an elf house, your cow would die, or your best horse would die, or your sheep would get lost. And in the modern stories, your tractor will blow up or catch on fire, or your house will burn down.

[0:15:05] Nancy

The most expensive thing you own is what is attacked. So it's like these things have changed. They're still current in the tradition. But most people conceive of the elves themselves as looking like old fashioned people because that's what they're used to reading about.

[0:15:28] Vanessa

Interesting. Whereas I feel like in America, when you think about elves, you think of either elves in the north pole, so they're little people with pointy ears and pointy shoes, or you think of for me, I think of woodland creatures, but they're always small. I would never have imagined someone wearing an old fashioned dress that would never have entered my mind. So that's really fascinating that that is are they full?

[0:16:03] Nancy

Well, the closest that we can conceive of them is in Tolkien's books. So if you think of the movies of the Lord of the rings, and you think of the elves in the movies, especially people like Galadriel, who is associated with a forest, she has powers that are more than human. She is beautiful and dangerous. She is beautiful and terrible. So she is actually the closest modern version of what the ancient Icelandic elves looked like and act like they were more powerful than humans.

[0:16:45] Nancy

They could intermarry with humans and have children. So they weren't tiny little people.

[0:16:52] Vanessa

Right.

[0:16:52] Nancy

But there were also other hidden folk in Iceland, and there still are. There were the trolls, there were the giants, there were the mermaids and the mermen. So there's many, many other kinds of hidden people in Iceland other than elves. And so some of the modern versions of Icelandic lore have very, very small fairies, like flower fairies, little tiny elves. They have medium sized elves. They have mountain spirits that are as big as the mountain, that are actually embodiments of the mountain. Wow.

[0:17:34] Vanessa

Okay.

[0:17:34] Nancy

So there are many different versions of elves. And another thing you have to remember is that that word elf is a translation. So we don't really know what originally the words meant in old Icelandic in the very early texts and the poems that we have from written down in like the twelve hundreds, the words for elf and troll and giant are all used interchangeably. The same creature could be called an elf sometimes and a giant other times, and they were worshipped as gods and goddesses.

[0:18:16] Nancy

They were deities. They were not just other species that shared the planet with you, they were actually considered to be deities. So the only word that really translates that properly in the folktales is God or deity. So that kind of puts it on a different level. These are not tinkerbelle and Santa's elves and the Keebler elves and that kind of thing. They're not just little people.

[0:18:44] Vanessa

Right.

[0:18:44] Nancy

They are powerful and power can come in small sizes.

[0:18:49] Vanessa

Right. And that explains why where they live and habitate are sacred places. Is that right?

[0:18:58] Nancy

Exactly, yes.

[0:18:59] Vanessa

And I think in your book you also mentioned thin places. Can you talk a little bit about thin places?

[0:19:05] Nancy

Right. That's a concept from a different culture that actually comes to us from Celtic Christianity. And it's a place where you can cross into the other world. So the other world can be heaven or it can be the fairy realm or it can be the elf world. In old Icelandic, old Norse mythology, there are nine worlds, and one of them is alfyim, so the elf home. So you could cross from the giants world into the elf world, into the human world, into the underworld.

[0:19:44] Nancy

So the thin place is a place where that transition is possible. And these are extremely sacred places. These are the places that are known as Holy Mountain in Iceland. So there are several places called Holy

Mountain. When you go to a place like that, you feel something different. And I like to think of them as places of inspiration. These are the places that you go to get ideas, to get inspiration, to let your imagination wander. But there's definitely something special about these places. And they have been known for a thousand years. They've had the same name for a thousand years.

[0:20:24] Vanessa

And so they're agreed upon in general where yes, absolutely.

[0:20:32] Nancy

The people who live on the farms or live in the area of these sacred spaces all know them and know the names and know why they are sacred and what can happen to you if you do the wrong thing there. This information has been passed down through the generations for 1000 years, so it's kept current. A lot of it was written down in the people still enjoy reading those books. They're known as the sagas, and they're very popular.

[0:21:06] Nancy

It's really Iceland's claim to fame is the medieval sagas. But it's something that people just simply know. And when I went to some of these farms, they would sit me down and tell me these stories because they knew that I was interested in stories. They say, well, you have to go to the top of this hill or you have to look at that mountain is where the certain spirit lives. Or you have to be very careful when you're crossing the tide, the tide marsh. Because this is where a spirit lives in the tide marsh. And you can get sucked into the quicksand if you do the wrong thing.

[0:21:44] Vanessa

Can you tell us one or two of those sagas. I would love to hear one of those stories. We make space on these stories.

[0:21:53] Nancy

Yeah. A saga is a very long story about a family or a clan that lives in a certain part of Iceland. But in in these sagas, there's shorter stories and shorter tales, and some of them tell of elves or of holy places. And there is a place in the west of Iceland that is one of the first places that I went to in Iceland and pretty much solidified my love for the country. And it's called Helgell or the Holy Mountain.

[0:22:27] Nancy

And the story that is told about it is that when the first settler came to that part of the country in the 870s, he took the carved figure of Thor the god, Thor the thunder god that he had brought with him from Norway, and he threw it off his boat. And he said, wherever Thor comes to rest is where I will build my house. And so Thor came to rest on the tip of this headland, and the settler built his farm there.

[0:23:02] Nancy

And he saw that there was this hill close by that he decided was sacred and that that was where or he saw that it was sacred and that was where he and his family would live after they died. He knew that inside that hill was another world, and it was so sacred that you had to wash your hands and feet before you were allowed to go on the mountain. Any human or animal on the mountain could not be killed unless they came down of their own free will.

[0:23:40] Nancy

And if you had a hard decision to make, you would climb to the top of a mountain to contemplate your choices. And they said that decisions made on Helgel never fail. So that this was a place that you went for sanctity, for safety, but also for inspiration. And they say that one, his descendant who lived there, one night when he was out fishing with his men, a storm came up and the boat sank, and he and his men drowned in the fjord off the coast of Holy Mountain.

[0:24:26] Nancy

And the shepherd who was out in the field with the sheep that evening, you have to remember that in Iceland the nights don't get dark, so he could see very well. He was out with the sheep. He saw the whole north face of the mountain open up and reveal a feast hall inside where the god Thor was holding a great

feast. And he invited this crew of fishermen into the mountain and said, you can sit there next to your father's, and we will have a feast.

[0:24:59] Nancy

And then the mountain closed up again, and the shepherd ran home to the farmhouse and said, I think the chieftain has drowned, because I saw him being welcomed into the hill. And I was told this story by the farmer who lives next to that hill thousand years later, wow, here he has a visitor come from America. And he says, do you know the story of the hill? And he tells me the story of the doors in the hill opening up and seeing the feast inside and hearing the talking and the laughter and the drinking songs and all the carousing in a real Viking feast.

[0:25:39] Nancy

So that was like my introduction to Iceland.

[0:25:44] Vanessa

Do people come near his farm?

[0:25:47] Nancy

They do. In fact, it has gotten more and more popular since I first went in 1986. In 1986, there was a small parking lot by the hill so you could park your car there and climb up the hill. And it was just, you know, the house is just on the neck around the corner of the hill. It's like right at the foot of the base of the hill. And so I had a backpack, my husband was with me and we backpacked from the nearest farm because this story that he told me is also in one of the sagas. And I wanted to see the place that it happened.

[0:26:23] Nancy

And we knocked on the door of the house and wanted to make sure it was okay for us to walk around there. And they said, oh, yes, you can put your tent up there on the side of the hill and you can walk all around the farm. And he showed us where the pads were and warned us to close the gates and things like that. Well, we were like the only people there. Now it's what, 30 years later? 35 years later, they have signs up and they have a bathroom and they have a kiosk with sweaters for sale and drinks. They have two or three summer houses on the farm that you can rent.

[0:27:12] Nancy

And bus loads of tourists come, like three and four bus loads a day. So I try to visit this farm every time I go to Iceland and now it's like a major tourist spot. And I kind of shake my head like, I couldn't have had the same interaction with the farm family that I had 35 years ago because now they're just overrun with tourists and they've even had to close the hill sometimes because it gets too muddy, it gets dangerous.

[0:27:40] Nancy

And they get little grants from their local town to put down gravel or to put down erosion barriers and stuff like this so that it won't be harmed. But it's a constant struggle. And they've kind of accepted the idea now that, oh, we're on the major tourist route, so we just have to deal with it.

[0:28:02] Vanessa

Yeah.

[0:28:02] Nancy

So somebody's always in the little kiosk answering tourist questions all day and I would imagine it changed their lives quite a lot.

[0:28:10] Vanessa

It would be hard to have a sacred moment when there's so many people around. It would be hard to be I have that private.

[0:28:20] Nancy

It is. So when I go there, I usually stay with the family because I've known them for 35 years, and I climb the mountain late at night when no one else is there or in days when it's really not very good weather and the tourists don't want to stay very long. And I also know a few little side little places on the hill that is hard to get to, where you can sit and contemplate and nobody can see that you're there.

[0:28:51] Nancy

So I have this special seat that I go and stay at, but it has changed.

[0:28:57] Vanessa

Yeah. Can you describe the geography? I'm having a hard time picturing exactly what it looks like because I know that some people describe Iceland as kind of a lunar scape, but there are I know, a lot of green areas as well. So what do you see when you go there?

[0:29:19] Nancy

Okay. Iceland is an island in the North Atlantic. It's about the size of Ohio, and it's almost round, it's almost circular, and the whole center of the country is a wasteland. So it's volcanoes and glaciers and black sand deserts. That's where the lunar landscape is, where the astronauts pretended they were on the moon and tested out their equipment. They really did do that. Wow. I didn't yeah. And there are two tracks through the center of the country, but they are closed for most of the year.

[0:30:01] Nancy

You can drive them in July and part of August, but the rest of the time it is completely snowed over or muddy and is not accessible. So there's this huge center of the country that is only accessible for a very short period of time, most easily on horseback. And then you have a ring around on the coastline where you have a lot of farms and small towns, and they can be very green. They can be like Ireland, but there's no trees there.

[0:30:40] Nancy

The trees are generally the native trees are very small and bushy and sort of pruned by the wind to about ten or 15ft high. They have been planting some non native species lately, so if you go to Iceland, you'll see bigger trees, especially in Reykjavik. But in the farmlands, it's still quite rare. So you have these wide open spaces that are green and beautiful with lots of horses and sheep and cows and big mountains just sort of appearing out of nowhere right on the edge of the sea, some of them with snow on them.

[0:31:17] Nancy

The city of Reykjavik is in the southwest corner, which is fairly close to where the airport is, and three quarters of the population of Iceland lives in the city of Reykjavik. So it's a small city with suburbs. It's a very small city. It's maybe 200,000 people, if you include all the suburbs, and you say that three point.

[0:31:40] Vanessa

And there's only 300 of the entire country.

[0:31:43] Nancy

Yeah, there's only 350,000 people in all of Iceland, and it's the size of Ohio. So people are very spread out except most of them live in Reykjavik. The rest of them are very spread out, so you have lots of empty space. The wind is constant, so there's no shelter from the wind except behind a cliff or behind there are no trees, there's no shelter built. And it is generally between about 30 degrees and 60 degrees Fahrenheit.

[0:32:21] Nancy

So you don't have very, very cold weather. You don't have very, very warm weather. So you'll have a lot of rain, a lot of sideways rain. Then some of these brilliant, bright, sunny days when it feels like the sun is within reach, you can just reach up and grab it. In the summer, you have the midnight sun, so you have pretty much 24 hours daylight. In the winter, you have the opposite. You have almost 24 hours darkness. Wow. So the sun will come up and you'll have twilight, and it will go down again.

[0:32:56] Nancy

And there are some places in Iceland that don't see the sun directly for three months in the winter, so they'll have sun return ceremonies when the sun finally gets high enough to clear the mountain. So it is a very elemental landscape, and there's a lot of room for thinking and walking and horseback riding. And then the city is very vibrant and modern and alive. It's a combination.

[0:33:26] Vanessa

How do you think the geography and the kind of crazy schedule of the sun affects the sagas and affects the folktales of Iceland? I would imagine it would have a great effect.

[0:33:40] Nancy

It's very easy to believe that nature is alive, that there are spirits in the rocks, that there are spirits in the mountains, because you feel it when you're there. You can be looking at this beautiful mountain and suddenly it will disappear, and it's just gone. And then it might come back again. And it's hard to realize that it's gone because it's 80 miles away, and maybe there was a rain shower between you and the mountain that just sort of passed through, but it's just suddenly it's gone.

[0:34:20] Nancy

When you're walking through a lava field in the twilight, whether it's the midnight sun or in the twilight of winter, it is very hard not to feel like those rocks are moving, that they are looking at you, that they are following you. It's extremely difficult to feel that you are alone, because you never feel like you are alone. There is something with you all the time. It's just a very alive kind of landscape.

[0:34:59] Nancy

And the weather is unpredictable. It can be deadly. You have to pay attention all the time. You have to have the right clothing. You have to tell people where you're going. You don't take risks. You don't take chances. The streams suddenly can flood, can suddenly grow ten times in size. If there's volcanic eruption underneath a glacier, it can just come roaring out of the mountains with no warning at all.

[0:35:36] Nancy

Now there's warning because now they monitor these things with. Modern technology, but in the old days, there was very little warning. You could sometimes smell a little sulfur in the air, but then there'd be this great flood with icebergs in it coming out of the mountain.

[0:35:53] Vanessa

How much of a warning do you get beforehand?

[0:36:01] Nancy

Iceland is very active volcanically, so there is always earthquakes going on, thousands of little earthquakes that you can't quite feel, but some of them you can feel sometimes there's little eruptions. There's always like, steam vents and boiling mud pots and things like that that are happening. So at any moment there could be a major volcanic eruption. There is a mountain right now, actually two of them, hecla and Katla in the south that are on eruption watch and have been on eruption watch probably for the last five years, maybe ten years, because all of our scientific instruments say the magma chamber is doing something, it is moving, but we don't know how quickly it's going to reach the surface. We can't quite predict that.

[0:36:57] Nancy

So in 2010, there was an eruption of a volcano that had a really fantastic name that nobody could pronounce, called ayafyatma Yokut. And it was really funny to hear the newscasters try to do this because this eruption closed down the airspace over Iceland and nobody could fly from Europe to America.

[0:37:22] Vanessa

Yes, I remember that. That was a big deal for that.

[0:37:26] Nancy

It was a big deal. Several days, all planes were grounded because of this eruption. Well, I was there when

the eruption started. It was Easter weekend that week, and it was a very small eruption. It was kind of like the little eruptions you have in Hawaii where the lava just oozes out of the cracks in the rocks, and it's beautiful, and it's like this hot pink orange color in the dark, and it's just sending up these fountains of fire and okay, I was there.

[0:38:01] Nancy

I took a jeep tour, and there were 15,000 people that went that weekend to just stand there out in the snow and watch the Earth being born, which is really what was happening. These are rocks being born. And let's see, this went on for like ten days, and then there was a blizzard. This area where the eruption was, was on the top of a mountain. So there was a blizzard and nobody was allowed to go there. No tourists were allowed to go there.

[0:38:34] Nancy

And then the big eruption happened and nobody expected it. It just suddenly the magma shot up through a different part of the crater. It actually was directly under where my jeep had parked ten days before.

[0:38:54] Vanessa

Oh, wow.

[0:38:55] Nancy

It was exactly where the tourists were parking to watch the pretty eruption, the tourist eruption. And so it was just chance that nobody was there, that the weather was bad, because this one was an explosive eruption that just went way high in the air and shot up these glass particles that if you suck them into your jet engine, you crash. So it's a place that had been highly monitored. The scientists were watching it.

[0:39:27] Nancy

They knew there was an active magma chamber that was emptying. They could watch it being emptied. And yet this still took everybody by surprise that suddenly there was this huge explosive eruption. So we don't know all that much about how the Earth works. We think that we can explain everything with science. We think that we can tame everything. And then the Earth comes back and says, oh, no, I have many tricks that you don't know about that you can't prepare for, that you just have to learn to adapt to.

[0:40:01] Vanessa

And that's actually something.

[0:40:02] Nancy

So a lot of these that you.

[0:40:04] Vanessa

Talk about in the book, how there's different disciplines that try and explain away different things, and they all have completely different explanations of elves or things that are crazy. Can you talk a little bit to that?

[0:40:22] Nancy

Yeah. One of the things that got me going in this book looking for the hidden folk was I was reading a review of a book on folklore, of Icelandic folklore, and it was being reviewed in an Icelandic American newspaper by somebody with an Icelandic background. And he said, Icelanders don't believe in elves the same way they believe in gravity. And I said to myself, how do I cylinders believe in gravity?

[0:40:51] Nancy

And so I started reading about gravity because I used to be a science writer. I used to work at a university science magazine. And so I thought, okay, let's read about gravity. And the thing that came immediately to mind was Newton and the apples falling on his head and that sort of thing. And I found out that, yeah, that's pretty much a folktale. He did see an apple fall, and that sort of got him thinking about gravity. He actually wrote that to a friend, but it didn't fall on his head.

[0:41:21] Nancy

That's the part that I remembered. It didn't fall on his head. But then you think, okay, so there's Newton's gravity, but then there's Einstein's theory of gravity, which actually contradicts Newton. They can't both be right. And then Einstein's theory of gravity leads to all sorts of things, like the theory of uncertainty and the theories of the multiverse and the theories of dark matter. And it wasn't for probably more than 50 years before we discovered that black holes were real and they were predicted by Einstein. But we finally figured out a way to test that.

[0:42:06] Nancy

The ideas of the quarks and the muons and the other subatomic particles, you know, those were theories that people said, oh, you know, these are these invisible particles that we can't detect, but we know they're there. And I'm thinking, sounds like elves black holes. They kind of sound like nature spirits, but they have different names. And we've spent millions of dollars trying to find our quarks and our muons and our black holes, and yet we don't spend millions of dollars trying to find L's because they're just sort of written off as folklore, not science.

[0:42:47] Nancy

Many of the most modern scientific theories, like string theory, depend on there being other universes. And this, again, when you're steeped in folklore, you're saying, okay, this sounds like Norse mythology with the nine worlds, right? But this is science that says there are multiple universes. So it depends how you look at the world, depends on how you have been taught, how you've been educated, what you've read, what you've heard, what people have told you.

[0:43:24] Nancy

And now it is considered normal to accept the scientific understanding of how volcanoes work, of how black holes work, of the fact that there are subatomic particles. And we can use a lot of this science to make things like we make our computers because we understand this sort of thing. We make GPS work and our cell phones because of these theories. And yet the traditional way of looking at the world is very similar, that there is invisible things that we can't see, that we can't measure, that are important, that are necessary for us to continue living on this Earth.

[0:44:15] Nancy

And the Icelanders tend to accept them better than we do, that there are things that we don't know that are important. And they give the name elf to many of these things.

[0:44:30] Vanessa

And I imagine they're not I don't think I've met an Icelandic person, but I imagine them as very logical and straightforward. Is that a correct interpretation of what their cultural I would say so, yeah.

[0:44:48] Nancy

They come off that way.

[0:44:51] Vanessa

Would you consider them like a Whimsical type of people?

[0:44:55] Nancy

They are? Not at all. No. In fact, they are among the most literate people that you'll meet. I mean, they publish more books than you can imagine. They are highly educated. Education in Iceland is free through college, so almost everybody has a college education. Some people have several degrees. Some of my friends who work in jobs, like they're bank tellers or telephone operators or farmers or real estate agents, they have two or three bachelor's degrees, like in law and in environmental science.

[0:45:42] Nancy

Some of them have master's degrees, and they just enjoy learning, and they enjoy talking about big ideas. So when you first meet and they're also very interested in the arts. The music thing in Iceland is incredible because there's also a big arts education opportunities, many opportunities in arts education for kids. So there's all this very modern, very technological approach here, or mindset. And if you say something about elves, most Icelanders will just sort of brush you off.

[0:46:27] Nancy

If you're just an American tourist come in, they'll say, oh, yes, well, you can go take a class in elf lore at this place, or you should go talk to the elf. Seer, or you can buy a book or something special, but they won't tell you about their own experiences until you get to know them. So, for instance, after I published this book, some of my Icelandic friends who thought that I had treated elf lore well, sympathetically, they would say, oh, I never told you, but my husband is an elf, seer.

[0:47:04] Nancy

And I said, really? This guy's a filmmaker? And she said, yeah. We were building our summer cottage out in the mountains, and we wanted to put a deck off to the side where we could barbecue and sit out and enjoy the sunset. And so he's laying the foundation for this deck, and suddenly he sees an elf. And the elf says, don't put your stupid deck here. Put it on the other side of the house. You are blocking my view.

[0:47:41] Vanessa

Oh, no.

[0:47:42] Nancy

And so he said and he just picked up his tools, he went inside and he sat down, and my friend said, what's the problem? He said, I was just told in no uncertain terms not to put the deck on the side of the house. So what do you think if we put it on the other side? And she says, I don't care. So they built a deck on the other side of the house. And she said, after we had stayed there for a while the next summer, we realized that if we had built it on the original side, it would have been very windy and very cold, and we would not have enjoyed it at all.

[0:48:16] Nancy

And the side that we did build it on was very sheltered and very nice. So it made perfect sense to have the deck on the other side of the house. And yet he did not make his decision because he realized it was on the cold side of the house or the windy side of the house. They hadn't lived there. They didn't really know. It was just as he was working on it, something that he interpreted as being an elf came and said, you're being stupid.

[0:48:49] Vanessa

Did he describe his internal reaction? Was it disconcerting to see something that he had never experienced or spoken to before?

[0:48:59] Nancy

He had experienced it. He had experienced it before. He has always been able to feel or see things that other people could not. But it was disconcerting. He realized, oh, my, I just had a direct encounter with some other intelligence who's telling me something important about my house that I didn't know. And so he did sort of have to step back and kind of, okay, I'm going to go in and have a cup of coffee and sit down and think about what just happened and then discuss it with my wife and say, what do you think? Shouldn't we put it on the other side? And yeah, why not?

[0:49:42] Nancy

There was no reason not to. And as it turned out, it was the right decision. But the way she told me the story was that this was because he could see elves and no one else could, and the elf could approach him because he could see elves. So it's this sort of story. I've heard several versions of this kind of thing where no one's going to offer you that story unless they trust you, unless they say, she understands what I mean. You're not going to maybe what happened was it was right. Maybe it was just the wind.

[0:50:22] Nancy

He felt the wind on his face and he realized it's really windy here, but that's not how he registered it. That's not what it felt like to him. We can explain it away logistically, but we don't have to.

[0:50:35] Vanessa

Did you have any conversations with scientists at all? Because I know that you said you before were a science writer, especially scientists that worked in the multiverse about how Icelandics view the world.

Was there any what is your no.

[0:51:00] Nancy

I didn't take that approach. All of my comments or quotes from scientists came from their published works. So I was more interested in trying to learn what the different disciplines, how they explain things like eyesight, what do we know about how our eyes work? And as it turns out, we don't know as much as we think we know. What do we know about the concept of belief and sort of religiosity and things like that.

[0:51:34] Nancy

Emotions. How do we process emotions? How does the brain work? So there's lots of science in the book, but I didn't actually interview people and say, how do Icelanders fit into that?

[0:51:47] Vanessa

Yeah, I'm just curious.

[0:51:48] Nancy

Some of the people who I'm just.

[0:51:51] Vanessa

Curious because you think of scientists as kind of no nonsense, but they are open minded enough to think in multiverses. So there is that open mindedness, but sometimes it shuts down at other areas. And so I'm just curious if there are some that are able to some.

[0:52:15] Nancy

Of the people who told me elf stories in Iceland are scientists.

[0:52:21] Vanessa

Okay?

[0:52:21] Nancy

So they don't have a problem. American scientists or British scientists or people that I might have access to would first have to understand what the concept of an elf is to an Icelander because their knee jerk reaction would be the same as mine was in the beginning, was just to dismiss it as the little people and ha ha. Right. But if you think of it more in spiritual terms, for instance, one of the comparisons that I ask people to make in their heads, if you think someone is crazy to talk to elves, do you think that a Christian is crazy to talk to God?

[0:53:05] Vanessa

Right, I found that.

[0:53:06] Nancy

Where do you draw that line? Where do you draw the line? Because in ancient Icelandic culture, the elves were gods and goddesses. They just haven't totally lost that sense of the old religions. They've sort of layered Christianity on top of it. It hasn't completely wiped out their old ideas.

[0:53:33] Vanessa

Yeah, that is such a compelling argument because we have a lot of things that from an outsider seem very crazy and Christians just take it at face value. But from an outside perspective, it's just as crazy as saying that believing in elves. So I found a very good argument in the book.

[0:54:05] Nancy

You kind of have to put it on the level of religion and we shouldn't make fun of other people's religious beliefs or or try to dismiss them because spirituality is a very important part of being human. You know, this is something that that we have. You know, scientists can be religious at the same time. There's no real contradiction between being a scientist and also having a spiritual life. It just depends on what kind of

spirituality you choose to practice.

[0:54:50] Nancy

But it's something that humans have always had and it seems to be necessary for our well being to have some sort of spiritual dimension to our lives.

[0:54:59] Vanessa

So you were saying how the start of the book started out more of as a travel journal and essays but it ended very differently. What do you think your final message was throughout the book that you felt like you were trying to get out?

[0:55:18] Nancy

The final message? Yeah. The final message comes down to the current climate crisis and the fact that we are living in the period that scientists now call the anthropocene or the human age, where the humans are really making changes to the Earth and to the Earth systems that will result in the extinction of many, many species, possibly even ourselves, if we don't change course. And the way we learn to value the Earth and the way we learn to take care of the Earth is through the stories that are told to us throughout our lives. And it seems to me that the stories that the Icelanders tell about the elves can give us a new way of looking at the sacredness of the Earth and at ways in which we can live better in balance and in harmony.

[0:56:12] Vanessa

Can you talk a little bit about how they take better care? Do they take better care of their environment? In Iceland?

[0:56:22] Nancy

They do and they do not. In Iceland, there's the drive to be modern just like there is here and there's the need for additional electricity and better roads and all that sort of modern problem. But there is a big sense in Iceland that you need to consider each project as whether it's necessary or not. As whether you're taking too much of nature, as whether this is really something that the human population in Iceland needs to destroy in order to continue living or whether it is better to allow nature to be protected.

[0:57:13] Nancy

So there's this battle probably within each Icelander rather than that there is factions within Iceland but there is this strong sense that the Earth is worth preserving and that it is simultaneously more powerful than we are and stronger than we are, but also fragile. And they have lived for 1000 years in an extremely harsh environment that in some cases they were very close to becoming extinct as Icelanders.

[0:57:57] Nancy

The population was reduced down to a few thousand after some of the volcanic eruptions in the late Middle Ages and early modern period. And they realize how easily they could just be wiped off that island if they don't learn to live in harmony with it. So there's a very strong environmental focus in Iceland and a very conscious willingness to try using geothermal power as much as possible to limit hydroelectric power because of the importance of the beauty of the rivers and the other creatures that live there. So there's a very strong environmental bent to most, I would say all, maybe Icelanders, because they realize how difficult it is to live on this planet.

[0:58:57] Vanessa

You said sometimes the projects were canceled and they would reference because the elves were oh yes.

[0:59:07] Nancy

The story that I started out the book with is how Rock Hilder got a road rerouted and made more narrow because it was encroaching upon a sacred place, an elf church, and why it was important to the local people that this part of the lava field not be destroyed. And the fact that there were elves living there was pretty much the key reason that they got this project stopped. So it's a beautiful place has always been a nature reserve. Now it's more of a park because they decided to put in the walking trail in the parking lot

so that it was obvious that, okay, this will not be destroyed in the next iteration.

[1:00:03] Nancy

If there decides to be a housing development nearby, it won't go in this spot because this is a sacred spot.

[1:00:10] Vanessa

And so in the end, you really wanted it to be a book about hope.

[1:00:16] Nancy

I do, yeah. And about wonder and about finding the beauty in the very small and otherwise unimpressive parts of nature. Like rocks, like just black lava rocks where the mosses grow.

[1:00:36] Vanessa

Yeah, I really love that concept. Well, can you tell our listeners where they can find your book?

[1:00:45] Nancy

Well, you can probably find here's the COVID Looking for the Hidden Folk, and it should be in any bookstore. Definitely it's online, you can buy it in several places. It's also available as an audiobook.

[1:01:02] Vanessa

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. I really appreciate it. Thank you Vanessa, and thank you.

[1:01:09] Nancy

Thanks very much.

[1:01:10] Vanessa

Thank you Focal Lidos, for joining us. And if it's okay with you, can we put some pictures up from your book on our website so people can see some pictures of Iceland? And do you have any of the pictures from the Icelandic, the elf church by any chance in the book?

[1:01:33] Nancy

I don't have actually the church, no. I have some other pictures from that area in the book.

[1:01:39] Vanessa

Well, we'll definitely put those up on the website, which is www.fabricoffolklore.com. And we'll also put a link up to Nancy's book where you can go directly to her web page to purchase that book. So we want to hear from you. What did you think about the show? Do you believe in elves? Is that the concept of elves that you had in mind when you were thinking we were starting this particular podcast? And have we changed your mind in any way?

[1:02:14] Vanessa

Have we shifted your perspective? We would love to hear from you. We have a Facebook group page, so it's Fabric of Folklore community where you can discuss these things, and we want to hear about your thoughts about our podcast and potential other guests that you want to hear about that maybe Nancy inspired you to think about someone else. You want us to bring on the podcast as well, because we want this podcast to be interactive and to be about what you want to hear about.

[1:02:50] Vanessa

So if you enjoyed this podcast, please don't forget to share, subscribe, comment, and give us all the stars, especially if you're listening on itunes, because that helps other people to find our brand new podcast. And if you decide to share it with someone, you can share it with your best friend and just tell her about how awesome this podcast was. And they may or may not think you were crazy, but that is the nature of folklore. So thanks for coming on our show and unraveling the mysteries of folklore with us today on Fabric of Folklore. And until next time, keep the folk alive.

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